

## **PLIGHT TO PROGRESS: A STUDY OF WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S "THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Alice Walker is a versatile and prolific writer, who won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her best-selling, best-known novel, 'The Color Purple'. Walker, a great writer today is because of her teacher, the poet, Muriel Rukeyser who had encouraged her to submit her verse for publication. Walker focuses on feminist issues within the black community, as well as upon intra-racial violence and oppression, places her in a category of writers willing to confront the difficult problems of communities in transition, to complain about their male/female and parent/child relationships, and to cajole their members to renew their faith in each other for the sake of the community survival. Alice Walker has explored the double-oppression of women and the triumphs of women in her novels of how the women suffer as women and as black women. She has coined the word, "Womanist" to articulate her concept of black feminism. Gloria Wade-Gayle observes:

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### **INTRODUCTION**

"As a black writer, Alice Walker is pre-occupied with the spiritual survival, the spiritual whole' of her people." As a womanist writer, she is committed to exploring the oppressions, insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women'" (Wade-Gayles 1990, 303)

She is the voices of thousands of women and black women to narrate the stories of Black Female Culture. Walker wants to sensitize human beings in general to the need to save the earth for the future generation. Walker's first novel, "The Third Life of Grange Copeland" which was published in 1970, chronicled three generations of poor black sharecroppers in Georgia. The novel is based largely on her parents' oppressive experiences and it is also exposed the terrible ways in which blacks sometimes treated each other. The novel tells about three generations of the Copeland – Grange, Brownfield and Ruth. Granges life was trapped in a sharecropper system which in return turns a form of slavery. Feeling frustrated, impotent to change his conditions he shows all his anger towards his wife, Margaret and his son, Brownfield. This made him to visit Josie, a prostitute who helps him feel like a man.

The oppression and the struggle, the women characters face in the novel was horrible and indigestible. Grange doesn't treat his son and his wife as a human being. The black male who cannot withstand racist pressures, sadistically takes frustrations towards their wife and children. The male characters who with no identity of their own resorts turns to oppression and violence. The novel stretches over the entire life time of the protagonist to emphasis the difficulty of transformation. Walker devotes the first half of the novel to Grange's son, Brownfield, to reveal what Grange was as a

young man; to captures the essence of Grange's "third life", she tells the story of Ruth, Granges grand – daughter. The second half of the novel shifts from Brownfield to Ruth.

Grange redefines himself as a man because of a women, by never again violating his essential responsibilities and acting according to the will of the enemy. All this happened because of the sacrifices and the sufferings the women characters, Margaret, Mem, and Josie undergone. The character, Margaret has gone to an extreme of sacrificing her lives for the development of Grange even though her challenged role fails to survive as a "whole", in the world of Grange Copeland. On the other hand, Mem, wife of Brownfield has also undergone the same pressure as Margaret, and she too was shot by Brownfield without surviving as a "whole". These women employ survival strategies that challenge basic present day ideologies. The rise and fall of the women characters in the novel is based on the power struggles in which they battle to wield control. Walker depicts the life of these women as they struggle with society, their landlords and their husbands. The struggle of these women's survival created an opportunity to Ruth for a life without Male chauvinism and violence. This happened because the other women live in a dominated life without any opportunities as Ruth was granted and they reclaim only a part of their identity.

Margaret, Granges wife was the woman resembles Washington's theory of "Suspended Women." In spite of poverty, she employs her own survival strategies to challenge dominant ideologies. She is the only female character in the novel that could be considered a victim. Her perspective was not respected by her husband or even by her son, Brownfield. He describes her as a submissive. This statement is well seen in the following lines:

"He thought his mother was like a dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show submission to his father." (TLGC: 5)

Margaret not only dealt with poverty but also with Grange's drunkenness, abuse and fidelity. Male chauvinism was well seen in the entire life of Margaret. The wild nature of Grange Copeland can be seen in below lines:

Every late Saturday nights, the tensions got worse than the other days and nights. "Grange would come home lurching drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shotgun. He threatened Margaret and she ran and hid in the woods with Brownfield huddled at the feet." (TLGC: 12)

Margaret reciprocates the power hierarchy in some way. However, when her husband started to see Josie, "the whore of his lusting youth" (177), Margaret felt the need to take revenge by doing the same thing Grange did to her; bedding down with other men like White Shipley though, Margaret did not lose her love and respect for Grange.

Even though she was a victim of multiple forms of oppression, she tries to attempt it back without knowing how to come out of it. If she had sufficient means, she would have fought and perhaps succeeded at claiming her identity and reconstructed her life. Barbara Christian, in an article "Novels for everyday use" discusses the inability for poor black women to fit into the female roles given by the society. This is not because they are not fit to make progress, but because they are denied the resources necessary to fill such roles which resulted in deprived of identity. Margaret's strength made her to hold the family together. When Grange abandons her, she poisons herself. On the other hand when Grange met Josie, the prostitute often to make him feel like a man, she was in the hands of a white, Shipley. She not only poisons her but also the illegitimate baby. Walker shows the capacity of Margaret that she dares to do anything if she is given a chance. When we observe Margaret very intensely, one sees her struggling with her husband Grange, over his treatment of her and

finally she rebels by taking other men and taking her own life by poisoning her and the child. Margaret's absence made Grange later to realize the deeds he created to his wife and he comes to understand and thinks of her as saintly.

Mem, Josie's educated niece and ward is a school teacher. Brownfield describes her as

"Someone to be loved and spoken to softly, someone never to frighten with his rough, coarse ways." (TLGC: 45)

Being educated, she tries to teach Brownfield how to read. In the beginning he feels that she can help him rise above his ignorance and he could reach the pinnacle. Like all the other men, he wants Mem to be his wife and his mother who will love him physically and who care him as if he were a child. Walker writes,

"He thought of [Mem] as of another mother." (TLGC: 45)

The life which Mem lives with Brownfield in Walker terms is "a harmony of despair." Mem is a super human woman of strength, endurance and compassion. She struggled for an identity for the sake of her three children. She fights with Brownfield with words "always for the children." Mary Helen Washington, writing of black women in real life, captures the loneliness of Mem Copeland. Black women have been alone, she writes, "because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection; and alone because we have had no one tell us stories ourselves" (Washington 1975, xxii.)

As black sharecroppers offered nothing, Brownfield like Grange Copeland troubles and tortures his wife, Mem. The fact that Brownfield is exposed to his father's brutality as a child is not enough to stop him from doing the same to his family later on. Like his father Grange, "Brownfield beat his once lovely wife now, regularly, because it made him feel, briefly, good. Every Saturday night he beat her, trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face; and she, inevitably, repaid him in becoming a haggard autonomous witch, ..." (Ibid., p55.) Here we see Brownfield playing the "blame the victim" trump card where he accuses Mem for his failure in life. Brownfield, as his name signifies, is a victim of the sharecropping system with its brown fields that is controlled by whites as typified by Shipley.

As Mem was educated, she tried her level best to understand Brownfield by working hard like "a cow herself" for the sake of children while Margaret tackles it with patience. Brownfield's ego made Mem and her children not to go to the house that she signs as a lease in town the education that she has made her to fight against him telling him that she has got a job and she will take the children to live in town whether he is accompanying her or not. Brownfield beats her to follow what he says. Mem, like Margaret doesn't want to be quiet. She wakes Brownfield who was sleeping off with his drunkenness by pushing a loaded gun barrel into his "balls", a symbolic statement that her liberation is sexual in nature. In her one triumphant moment Mem made Brownfield to lie on the floor gravelling in his own blood and vomit, she delivers her "Ten Commandments", her rules of conduct for the new home she is going to control. All Brownfield can do is to cower against the door and sob, "yes, ma'am. (TLGC: 97)

Mem also describes how Brownfield tries to shift the burden of guilt for all the mistakes that he has done onto the white man:

"Mem .... You know how hard it is to be a black man down here .... Mem baby, the white folks just don't nobody feel like doing right ..... what can a man do?" .... He can quit wailing like a old seedy jackass!" she said, hitting him over the head with the gun. (TLGC: 95)

After two years Mem was sick and couldn't go to work. Brownfield used this as a good chance and never pays rent which leads them to come back to the same house where she was murdered by Brownfield due to his anguishes and jealousy. Though she struggles like Margaret, she wins finally through her daughter, Ruth and that was Grange's "the third life" where he thought that Margaret was a saint and realizes his harshness towards her and the sacrifices his wife and daughter-in-law, Mem did for the sake of the children. Grange tries his best to make Brownfield understand the same but finally kills. Margaret and Mem are destroyed when they begin to gain strength or to rebel. Even as mothers and wives, they are more deranged and abused. Thus, to Barbara Christian, Margaret and Mem are examples of Walker's first group of Black women.

"Suspended Women", "the most abused of the abused" (Christian 1980, 194)

Though they are abused, they both are the winners at the end through Ruth. They are also women who are trapped by the stereo typed inflicted in blacks and on women. This is well seen when Mamie Lou Banks symbolizes the multiplicity of pain that black women inflicted on each other. There must be a solution to a problem and thus Margaret and Mem, though struggle more at the beginning for survival wins at the end through Ruth. Ruth, the grand daughter is also a woman who changes Grange and made him realize the past deeds that he has done to his wife and children. On the other hand, Brownfield who loves his wife more and wants her to be like his mother changes himself entering into sharecropping systems who was finally killed by his own father to save Ruth and her life.

Josie is a woman who doesn't depend on a man for financial needs as she runs the Inn. She was out of the house by her father as she was pregnant at the age of sixteen. To win and prove herself, she uses her body, the only asset, to earn money using men. She understands that the body of woman are used by men for their pleasure and then discarded. This made her become a prostitute. Gloria Wade Gayles observes:

"Like a phoenix who rises from the ashes with unfurled wings, she soars above male control to become the richest and most powerful black person, male or female in the community." (Wade-Gayles 1984, 130)

Josie, the prostitute who has been Grange's longtime mistress and Brownfield's mistress and caretaker was not considered to be the victim as Margaret. Josie obtained her power using sexuality as a survival strategy. Josie is an independent woman who tries to control Brownfield while Margaret was not. This happened as she was the owner of the Dew Drop Inn. Josie hates Margaret and Mem taking Grange and Brownfield away from them and feels. The action was same to Mem too in spite of her being her niece. Years later the same Josie was away from Grange because of her step-grand daughter, Ruth. This made her to join with Brownfield to have the courts take Ruth from Grange. Hence women in some way raise themselves through situation to prove themselves. Josie is free of the programmatic enhancement of others and remains the most complex female character in the novel.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through her novel, Walker made the reader understand the physical and the mental sufferings, the trauma of the black women belonging to different times, age groups and background. The heroines, Margaret and Mem struggles physically and mentally to survive themselves as well as for the life of their children. Walker clearly makes the reader understand how the black women become the products of dehumanizing culture. The women in the third life of Grange Copeland caught in a social web without an exit. We see women Margaret and Mem as women who struggles at the

beginning of the novel later becomes the Super-Human of strength, endurance and compassion as a mother. Though they are not alive at the end, they win through Ruth, Grange's grand-daughter.

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